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TAGS: [ENRG](#) [BE](#) [CG](#) [IAEA](#)
SUBJECT: UPDATE ON BELGIAN NUCLEAR ENERGY ISSUES

REF: A. 06 BRUSSELS 385
[1](#)B. 06 BRUSSELS 2190
[1](#)C. 06 BRUSSELS 2249

Classified By: D/Econ Counselor Paul Rohrllich, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (f)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The Director of Belgium's Nuclear Research Center (SCK) and the Center's security advisor claim the security upgrades at the Center's BR-2 reactor are nearing completion, subject to delays caused by unforeseen technical, budgetary, and management issues. Embassy officers will visit on March 28 to review the steps taken. Belgian officials expressed concern that the ongoing dismantling of Belgonucleaire, an industry pioneer in fuel reprocessing jointly held by the Belgian government and Electrabel (now Suez), will result in a dispersion of an important center of nuclear engineering knowledge as engineers are retire early, transfer, or are laid off. Suez, they claim, has no interest in maintaining Belgonucleaire now that AREVA has built a similar reprocessing facility in France. Revisiting Belgium's 2003 decision to phase out nuclear power after 2015 is more important than ever, given climate change concerns. Nonetheless the politics of Belgium's June federal elections make this issue very difficult. Following several articles in the Belgian press regarding the decrepit state of the University of Kinshasa, Congo, research reactor, SCK has told the Belgian government it is prepared to assist with decommissioning or otherwise securing the facility if funding is provided.
End Summary.

Progress at the SCK/CEN

[1](#)2. (C) Frank DeConinck, Director of the Nuclear Research Center (SCK/CEN), and Yvan Demesmaeker, contract security consultant to SCK, briefed D/Econcouns on the progress made since a US interagency team visited in January 2006 (refs A and B). Most of the recommended security upgrades have been installed. According to DeConinck and Demesmaeker, progress was slowed by a GOB request to SCK to cut its operating budget by 3 million euros, which required lengthy review and negotiation with the government to avoid having to cut 200 of 600 workers and still be able to pay for the upgrades. Labor actions, in light of possible cuts, were also a factor. The death of SCK General Manager Pul Govaerts in February also slowed implementation, as did minor technical problems which though all resolved, stretched out the timeframe so as not to impede the scheduled research work at the Center. Embodffs will tour the facility on March 28, and report details septel.

Belgonucleaire a Loss for the Industry

13. (C) Belgian contacts expressed regret over the shutdown of Belgonucleaire currently underway. The firm, an industry pioneer in the reprocessing technology of mixed-oxide fuel rods for the past 25 years, has run out of contracts, and is closing its processing arm, although it still will provide some consulting services. Given the problems reported in the Finnish and other nuclear power plants under construction in Europe, DeConinck regretted seeing nuclear engineers and workers being transferred, given early retirement, or laid off. Having built no new nuclear generating plants for 25 years, the world is short of such engineering expertise. When asked whether the Suez takeover of Electrabel had made any difference, he noted that AREVA now has its own reprocessing facility operating in France, so Suez has little reason to keep the Belgian operation afloat. (Comment: On the contrary, a Suez executive told the Belgian press of the firm's interest in seeing Electrabel build new nuclear generation centers in France, and Suez is holding a nuclear job fair March 13-14 in Brussels with an eye to its future staffing needs.)

Environmentalism Helps and Hinders the Case

14. (C) DeConinck and DeMesmaeker observed that the June 10 election in Belgium was making it more difficult to reassess the 2003 government policy to phase out nuclear power after 2015 (ref C). While the concern over global CO2 emissions makes nuclear energy attractive, the Flemish Socialist Party (SP.A) hopes to capture the small Green party vote by pledging to uphold the existing policy. The Flemish Christian Democrats and French Socialists have not taken a public position yet. Flemish and Francophone Liberal parties have expressed willingness to rethink the previous government's position, but federal elections may halt that process. The shrinking timeframe in which to plan for and construct alternatives for 55 percent of Belgium's electricity may wed the country to extending the existing nuclear plants' licenses past 2015.

Dealing with the Kinshasa Reactor

15. (C) In 1959, prior to the independence of the Congo, Belgium built a small nuclear research reactor at the University of Kinshasa. Built as part of the "Atoms for Peace" program, the Triga 1 reactor was replaced by a US-designed Triga 2 reactor in 1972. This Triga 2 was highlighted in the Belgian media last week for its decrepit state of maintenance and safety. DeConinck confirmed the poor state of the facility, and expressed doubt that it had either a research or maintenance budget. He questioned the truth of press reports that two rods of its uranium fuel had been stolen, however. The danger the Kinshasa reactor poses on both security and safety grounds is clear, and DeConinck offered that SCK would work in Kinshasa to decommission or secure the facility if funding can be found. SCK has no funds for such activity in its own budget. Emboff asked if any IAEA assistance fund existed for such circumstances. DeConinck remarked that, even given funds, the GOB's leverage with the government in Kinshasa was weak, at present, due to the unrelated but very public opposition by several Belgian Ministers to Defense Minister Flahaut's invitation (since withdrawn) to Congolese President Kabila to come to Belgium to receive an honorary degree from a Belgian university.

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